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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

MADERA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

Volume VII - Number 2 April 1967

THE DICKENSON FAMILY

By Nathan C. Sweet

COARSEGOLD SCHOOL - 1890

Top: Ollie Whitfield (Mrs. Thomas Smithers); Amy Colemore (Mrs. F. Burguet); Anna Dickenson; Adelia Ecker; Nora Ninnis. 2nd Row: Albert Ninnis, Otto Ecker, Ed Hearn, Goldie Elam, Edith Ecker, Daisy Whitfield, Kate Elam, Theodore Ninnis. Bottom Row: Fritz Krohn, Arthur Ninnis, Annie Krohn, Meta Krohn, Rose Thurman, Ida Elam, Willie Elam, Albert Jones.

Some years ago, Rose Chapman and her mother, William Melvin, of Coarsegold, loaned the writer some old school pictures, remarkable in that all the portraits were identified. We reproduce the group for 1890, or thereabout, presided over by a teacher who had spent most of her life in Madera. What a purposeful, self-reliant young woman Anna Dickenson appears, sitting top-center surrounded by her flock.

The Dickensons belong to that greatly outnumbered band of pioneers who adopted California before the "Gold Rush". Anna's grandfather, Gallant Duncan Dickenson, was born in Pennsylvania, or Virginia, authorities differ, in 1806, but he grew up in Virginia. He moved to Tennessee and married Isabella McCreary in 1828. Their first child, Anna's father, James J. Dickenson, was born in 1829. William and Margaret were also born in Tennessee. In the early thirties, the family moved to Missouri where three more children arrived, the last in 1836. Their names were Lucy Jane, G. W. and Samuel F. M.

In Tennessee, Dickenson worked as a plantation overseer. I find no mention of his labors in Missouri, but he evidently acquired a knowledge of construction, judging by his later accomplishments in California.

In 1846, he and his family crossed the plains with a company commanded by Captain Campbell in the first stages of the journey, but later the parties of Gorden, Dickenson and Young are mentioned by Sam Young in an article in the San Jose Pioneer, quoted by Bancroft. They crossed the Sierra without mishap, ahead of the Donner party. The latter was the last to cross that season, was stalled by heavy snow, suffered great hardship and many deaths. Bancroft gives two hundred and fifty as the approximate number of male immigrants who crossed the plains to California in 1846.

Dickenson went directly to Santa Clara where he joined the home guard and there spent the winter of 1846-47. In the spring he moved to Santa Cruz and Monterey. By fall he had burnt the bricks and constructed the first brick house in California.

When gold was discovered in 1848, he went to the mines in Tuolumne County where Dickenson Gulch was named for him. He settled at Stockton in 1849. The family was listed in the 1850 census of San Joaquin County including age and birthplace. Under occupation, Gallant and the two oldest boys, James and William, were called "Speculator," possibly in real estate.

The Stockton Times of October 12, 1850, reported that on October 9, Miss Lucy Jane Dickenson was married by the Rev. Corwin to Charles Peck of Stockton at the residence on Market Street of her father, G. Dickenson, Esq.

Bancroft's Pioneer Index says that, in Stockton, Dickenson was a hotelkeeper, alcalde and member of the Constitutional Convention; that his daughters were the first American women married at Stockton - Margaret to A. J. Lawrey and Lucy Jane to N. B. Stoneroad. The Stoneroad marriage was her second and occurred in 1867. Bancroft goes on to say that in 1852, Dickenson moved to the Tuolumne River, where he kept a ferry and hotel. In 1867 he moved to Merced County. He died there in 1870. He was active in the Methodist Church. His widow died in San Jose in 1877. Two of the boys, George W. and William L., became Merced County pioneers.

We find some mention of Gallant Dickenson in "Sam Ward in the Gold Rush," edited by Carvel Collins. In a note, Collins says that when Dickenson was burned out in Stockton, he purchased Horr's Ferry on the Tuolumne for $12,000.00. As the ferry was on the main Stockton to Millerton road, Sam Ward passed by quite often. He spoke of the keeper as a friend and remarked that he was a Missouri rifleman, which implied that he was a "crack shot". Ward was in charge of the Indian reservation on the Merced River at Belt's Ferry near Merced Falls.

James J., the eldest son, was sent east to school from 1850 to 1852. When he returned he started a freight line of ox-teams to the mines. In 1856 he shifted his freighting business to Nevada. This move became expedient after a shooting affray in the courtroom of Judge Creaner in La Grange on March 26, 1856.

The Summer brothers, Frank and George, were engaged in a legal controversy over land titles with the Dickenson family. The decision was in favor of Summer. The fight started after court was dismissed and ended with the death of Frank Summer and a friend of Dickenson's named Martin Anderson. The affair was considered of sufficient historical importance to be mentioned in Elliott and Moore's History of Stanislaus County. Nothing was said of any resultant trial for murder.

In 1865, James became a sawmill operator in Mariposa County for seven years. It was in 1865 that he married Amanda Hardwick, daughter of Thomas Jefferson and [illegible] (McFarland) Hardwick. They had come to California from Georgia in 1859 by way of Tennessee, Alabama and Jasper County, Missouri, settling on the Merced River. There were four daughters in the Hardwick family. Mary Catherine married William Hoskins, Huldah Jane married Mark Howell and Ann Elizabeth married John Ruddle.

I find no mention of an association between J. J. Dickenson and W. H. Thurman as lumbermen in Mariposa County. Doubtless a friendship or mutual respect had its origin in those years leading up to 1872 and the formation of the California Lumber Company, the building of the sixty miles of flume, the founding of the city of Madera at the flume terminous and connection with the recently completed Central Pacific Railroad in the San Joaquin Valley. For ten years following 1872, they were stockholders and at times contractors or employees of the lumber company which they had promoted among their friends, neighbors and relatives of Merced County.

Their backgrounds of both environment and experience were very similar. Both were born in Tennessee, Dickenson being senior by two years. Their fathers were raised in Virginia. Thurman served in the Mexican war and came to California in 1849. He mined for a while and then engaged in teaming and freighting in the mountains, finally settling in Washoe County, Nevada. He returned to California in 1869 and became a lumberman near Coulterville in Mariposa County. They were well trained by experience to handle the problems they were to meet and solve during the years from 1872 to 1876, when the project was completed. Oxen were the motive power used to load the solid wheel log wagons in the woods and to haul the loaded wagons to the mill at first; later horse and mule teams were used. A technical description of lumbering in the Sierra National Forest was written by Bert Hurt and published by the Forest Service in 1941.

The list of stockholders in the California Lumber Company reads like a census of Merced County pioneers: P. D. Wigginton, successful Merced attorney was president; Mark Howell, Merced County surveyor was secretary and engineer. Among the stockholders were John Montgomery, J. B. Cocanour, N. B. Stoneroad, Fred Gardenhire, James Hicks, and many others too numerous to mention. We must include the San Francisco capitalists Henry Miller, Charles Lux and Isaac Friedlander. As has been noted, Stoneroad and Howell were relatives of Dickenson by marriage.

Several flumes had been completed in the northern Sierras before the Madera flume was started, so that this method of transporting lumber was already a proved success. However, the inventive genius of Thurman improved fluming efficiency. He invented a type of clamp to hold the boards together in bundles which helped to prevent "lumber jams" on the ride down and reduced end damage to the boards.

The flume was completed to the railroad the first of August, 1876, a side track was installed and, in October, a planing mill was under construction in Madera. The operation of this mill appears to have been undertaken by the firm of Thurman and Dickenson, with Thurman in charge.

In June, 1877, W. H. Thurman was a delegate to the State democratic convention from Borden, as was James Dickenson from the sawmill precinct in the mountains. As the year progressed the drought and its effect on business became more pronounced. The lumber company's financing became difficult as business generally decreased. Assessments were levied against stockholders already in business trouble. In August, a delinquent list was published. In September, 1877, the company moved its office from Merced to Madera, and a reorganization was effected. In October, another delinquent list appeared, with the names of the new officers and directors. Henry Miller was president; W. H. Thurman, treasurer; Frank Van Mathenesse, secretary; Gilman Chamberlin, superintendent. The directors were Henry Miller, Charles Lux, R. E. Doyle, W. N. Neill, and W. H. Thurman. The creditors were notified to file their claims at once at the office in Madera. In November, the company advertised a reduction in price

on the five million board feet of lumber in the yards at Madera.

A meeting of the creditors was held on December 8, 1877, and in February, 1878, the California Lumber Company filed a petition in bankruptcy. The court appointed Edwin Moore as receiver.

In May, a petition in bankruptcy was filed by the firm of Thurman and Dickenson of Madera with debts of $5,885 and assets of $8,390. In June, James Dickenson was on the election board at the mill precinct in the mountains with J. Wesley Smith and R. L. Green. At this time the Yosemite Stage and Turnpike Company was incorporated in San Francisco with Wm. H. Thurman as a director.

The Commercial and Savings Bank of San Jose was incorporated in 1874 by Return Roberts, Edward McLoughlin and others with capital stock subscribed to the amount of $626,900. This group of financiers loaned the lumber company $100,000, evidenced by four notes, one for $10,000 payable December 15, 1877, and three for $30,000 each, payable December 15, 1878, 1879 and 1880. These notes carried interest payments of 1¼% per month, payable monthly, and secured by a trust deed on the lumber company's real estate. When the lumber company became bankrupt, the bank foreclosed and purchased the property, reselling it immediately to a new company, organized for the purpose, called the Madera Flume and Trading Company. The president was Mariano Malarin, son-in-law of Pacheco, the owner of the San Luis Grant in Merced County. Malarin was a resident of the city of Santa Clara.

By the last of June, 1878, the new owners were ready to resume operation of this property acquired by them at a fraction of its cost. (Some sources say the cost was $400,000). Business conditions in California were so adverse that it was several years before any considerable return was received; however, the quality of the timber in the area tapped and the basic soundness of the plan itself paid off when California and especially the San Joaquin Valley recovered from the drought of 1877.

Thurman and Dickenson accepted a contract to operate the sawmills for two years, after which the partnership was dissolved. Thurman moved to Walla Walla, Washington, later returning to start a sawmill at Fish Camp in Mariposa County a few miles north of the California mill. Later still he became a resident of the city of Madera and sheriff of Madera County. Ill health caused him to retire from office and he died in 1895.

James Dickenson continued to manage the sawmills until his retirement due to sickness in 1889. He lived in Madera until his death in 1897. The Dickensons had three children: Frank, Anna and Ruth. Anna taught school in Coarsegold, Madera and Fresno. Ruth, also a Madera teacher, married and moved to Palo Alto. Friends, still living, remember Ruth as an exceptionally fine-looking young woman. The son's exploits were of no particular credit to his family.

* * * * * * * * *

Mr. Nathan Sweet, author of the Dickenson story up to this point, suggested that perhaps the Society Board of Directors could contribute additional material.

The Madera County Historical Society was very fortunate to receive a scrapbook, dated 1893, belonging to Miss Anna Dickenson. (Remember the Thurmans and Dickensons were close friends in those days.) Mrs. Cleta Kline, owner of the Madera Furniture Store, gave this scrapbook to the Society. It was found in the Thurman home when the late Bud Kline purchased some antique furniture from the Thurman home.

The scrapbook is filled with early Madera County and City history. The following material is taken from the scrapbook.

(We were unable to find much information related to Ruth Dickenson, we know she taught in Madera City schools after 1894. Anna is mentioned as a teacher in Flume District, Coarsegold and later in Madera City until 1894.)

The following item is from the Madera Tribune in 1893, telling of the 9th grade graduation of the following students: Ruth Dickenson, Sadie Howard, Lois Worthington, J. B. Williams (now 99 years of age and

living in Madera), Dave Edwards and Willie Griffin. The article starts by saying, "Never, since the Athletic Hall was built has there been such a crowd. All seats were filled by 7:30 P.M. Stores were ransacked along Yosemite Avenue for extra chairs. (The Athletic Hall was above the building now occupied by DeCesari Stationery Store.) The Welcoming Address was given by Ruth Dickenson. It was well written and given in good style."

We asked J. B. Williams, of that 1893 graduating class, if he recalled that graduation. He said he remembered Ruth very well, that she was very pretty and a fine girl.

From the Madera Tribune again we read:

"On December 17, 1894, one of the happiest events of the season took place at the hour of 5 o'clock at the home of Mr. and Mrs. James Dickenson when Miles Wallace and Miss Annie Dickenson were joined in the holy bonds of wedlock. Rev. W. B. McElwee performed the ceremony. After the ceremony an elegant wedding dinner was served at the Yosemite Hotel.

The bride is one of the most talented and refined ladies on the coast. The groom is one of the brightest legal lights in the valley. The Tribune joins in extending congratulations. The couple will reside at the Yosemite Hotel for the present."

In another column in the same issue of the Tribune appears the announcement of Attorney Miles Wallace for nomination of District Attorney of Madera County, on the Democratic ticket. Quoting the Tribune: "No man has announced himself for an office in the gift of the people of Madera County who is more worthy and competent than Miles Wallace. He is one of the ablest attorneys in the valley, one of our most learned men and a finished orator. There is no doubt when the votes are counted in November he will be the next District Attorney."

The old Tribunes of 1894, 95, 96 are filled with stories of trials where Miles Wallace is mentioned and his skill as an attorney and as the County District Attorney.

Miles Wallace was District Attorney of Madera County from November 6, 1894, through June 11, 1897.

The Madera Tribune of Jan. 4, 1897, states, "The genial countenance of our District Attorney was wreathed in smiles as he came down town. Later it was revealed that the cause of his unusual good humor was the arrival of a baby daughter at his home that morning."

From the Evening Post, May 24, 1897: "MILES WALLACE FOR GUARDIAN OF YOSEMITE VALLEY. He will retire from the District Attorney's office in Madera. He will replace Galen Clark, first guardian of the park." There is much more to the article but not of concern in our story.

In the Fresno Morning Republican on February 25 we have the final story of Anna Dickenson's husband, Miles Wallace:

"Miles Wallace, 482 Glenn Avenue, United States commissioner, president of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, and a member of the bar of Fresno county for the past twenty years, died suddenly at his home February 24th of heart disease. During his 30 years residence in the state Wallace had been an active citizen in Fresno and Madera counties, always taking a prominent part in questions of public interest. A few weeks ago he was elected as president of the Chamber of Commerce and was in the midst of a campaign to increase the membership of the organization when death came. Miles Wallace was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, February 19, 1861, and was but a few days over 56 years of age. Receiving his early schooling in Tennessee he went to Kentucky, where he studied law. He began his practice in Texas and later moved to Arkansas. Thirty years ago he came to Sanger, and spent the remainder of his life in Fresno and Madera counties. After residing in Sanger for about six years he moved to Madera, where after practicing law for a short time, he was elected district attorney of Madera county. While in Madera he was married to Miss Anna Dickinson, daughter of the late James Dickinson, a lumberman of Madera. Upon the expiration of his term of office of district attorney, Wallace was appointed guardian of Yosemite National Park under Governor Budd, and for two years lived

in the valley. He then came to Fresno and has since lived here, continuing in the practice of law and taking an active interest in all public affairs of the city and state. Members and relatives of the family surviving are Mrs. Anna Wallace, the widow, two daughters, Cuba and Lee Wallace, a brother Fred Wallace, in Tennessee, and a half brother, Theodore Smith, of the same state, and Mrs. Dickinson, mother of Mrs. Wallace, who lives at the Wallace home."

The following obituary was taken from the Madera Tribune. We checked with the Madera Cemetery District. They stated the headstone placed on J.J. Dickenson's grave was ordered by Miles Wallace. If others of the family are buried there we do not know.

"J. J. DICKENSON DEAD.

He was a Pioneer of Fresno and Madera Counties.

J. J. Dickenson, one of the old settlers of this valley died last Saturday morning after an illness which extended over a period of several years. About twelve years ago the deceased was stricken with paralysis and of late years had grown quite feeble, requiring constant care and attendance during the past year. A few weeks ago Mr. Dickenson became confined to his bed and it was soon evident that it was his last sickness. He rapidly grew worse and finally, on Saturday morning, answered the call of the Master. The deceased was surrounded by his family when the final struggle came.

The deceased was a highly respected citizen of Madera and a prominent member of the Masonic Order of this place, under the auspices of which organization the funeral was conducted Sunday afternoon from Masonic Temple, from where the funeral cortege followed the remains of the departed citizen to their last resting place in Arbor Vitae cemetery.

The deceased left a wife and three children, Frank, Ruth and Mrs. Miles Wallace, to whom the heartfelt sympathy of the whole community is extended."

Thus ends the story of the Dickinson family insofar as we have been able to gather facts from here and there.

* * * * * * * * *

LT. SKEANE S. SKEENES

During the year 1850 James Savage had a trading post on the Fresno River. About December 18th of that year word came to the Mariposa diggings at Agua Fria that the post had been attacked by Indians and some employees of John Savage killed.

Colonel Adam Johnson, Federal Indian Agent, was then at Agua Fria. He went with some miners to the trading post and found the dismembered bodies of three men: Greeley, the manager, and two clerks, Stiffner and Kennedy. (Canada according to J. M. Hutchins.) Colonel Johnson gave them a decent burial and then returned to Agua Fria where he sent out a call to the mining camps in that vicinity to pursue and punish the Indians. Seventy-four men assembled for that purpose. Sheriff James Burney was made Captain; J. W. Riley, First Lieutenant; and Skeenes, Second Lieutenant. Skeenes was a young bachelor who had experienced some service in the Austrian Army.

The Company left Agua Fria on January 6, 1851. James Savage was the guide. (Savage did not become Major of the Mariposa Battalion until February of 1851.) Contact was made with the Indians on or about January 8, 1851, and a battle was fought among the brush and rocks. The Indians were armed with bows and arrows and some muskets. The fact that they had some firearms was a surprise to the whites. Most of the historians agree that the battle was fought not far from the present location of Ahwahnee Sanitarium. Lieutenant Skeenes was seriously wounded by musket fire and died from the effects of his wounds. The exact date of his death is uncertain, but it must have been about January 12, 1851. He was buried by the soldiers at the edge of a meadow near Ahwahnee and a mound of rocks was placed over his grave. It is ironic to say the least that the grave of this brave soldier went otherwise unmarked for one hundred and seven years.

At the time of the battle there was a young man living in the vicinity by the name of Frank Femmons. He soon learned the exact location of the grave and years later he pointed out the spot to William Sell and his sister, Eleanor Sell Crooks. In an old minute book of the Mountain Progressive Club there appears the following:

"March 8, 1913.

Mr. Frank Femmons stated a battle was fought near Ahwahnee in 1851. An officer Lieut. Skeenes was killed and buried there. No marker. Suggested one be erected."

"May 17, 1913.

Postpone any action until more definite information obtained."

About 1955 Mattie Fhy read the foregoing minutes and urged various persons to do something about it. Nothing was done until 1957 when her brother, Thomas Fhy, became Commander of Madera Post No. 11, American Legion. He requested William Venturi who was then Veterans Service Officer to investigate the possibility of getting a soldier's marker. Mr. Venturi sent all available information to the War Department. During the month of May, 1958, Stanley L. Mewhirter who was then Veterans Service Officer received a letter from the office of the Quartermaster General at Washington, D. C. reading as follows:

"Receipt is acknowledged of your letter of a recent date relative to Lieutenant Skeane, a deceased soldier of the Indian Wars.

"Military records and/or data are not on file in the office of the Quartermaster General. Information pertaining to Lieutenant Skeane was obtained from The California State Library and the Archives and Central Records Depository, Sacramento, California. Further, a report from the National Archives (General Accounting Office Records), Washington 25, D. C., advised us that 2d Lieutenant Skeane was wounded and died 12 January 1851, and that California was reimbursed for this service. In view of this, his eligibility for a Government marker was established. The date and place of his birth, however, is not of record.

"It is hoped that the above explanation answers your inquiry.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) E. F. Lenard

For R. F. Beckman
Chief, Headstone Branch
Memorial Division"

The War Department sent the marker to Madera. The Board of Supervisors authorized the erection of a small fence around the grave. When the workmen arrived to do the work they were guided to the spot by Eleanor Sell Crooks. While the workmen were digging one of the postholes they came upon human bones. Imbedded in the scapula was a musket ball of about 45 caliber and of the same type used in the muskets of 1850. Stanley L. Mewhirter and Paul Aja were present and saw the bone coming out of the earth. It was viewed by the other workmen and a short time later by William Venturi and Mason A. Bailey.

On November 11, 1958, several legionnaires, Boy Scouts and interested spectators gathered at the grave and appropriate ceremonies were conducted commemorating this brave soldier.

The exact inscription on the grave marker is as follows:

"Skeane S. Skeenes, 2d Lt. Capt.
Burney's Co. 1, Indian Wars,
January 12, 1851"

Mason A. Bailey
Historian for Madera Post No. 11,
American Legion

References:

California's Agua Fria by Raymond F. Wood
Academy Library Guild, Fresno, California, 1954
Discovery of Yosemite by Dr. Bunell
California State Library, Sacramento, California
Sierra Star published at Oakhurst, California
Madera Daily Tribune published at Madera, California.

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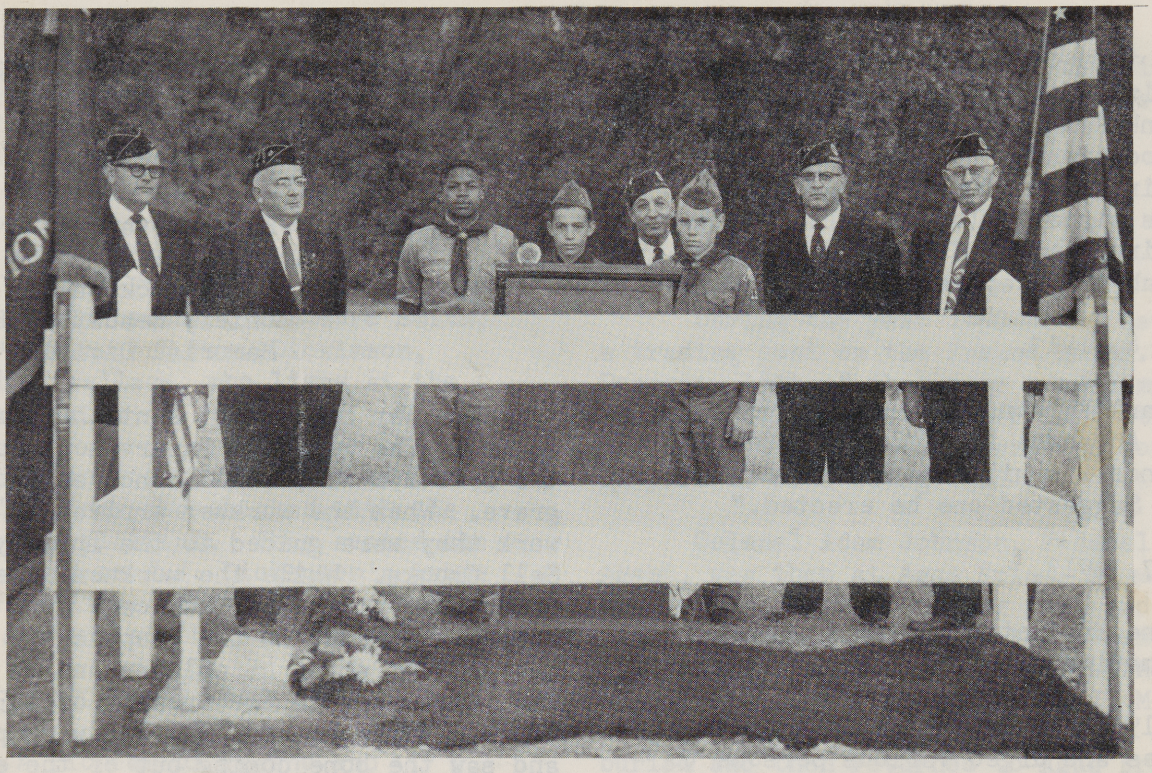

November 11, 1958
From left to right: Stanley Mewhirter, Louis Hartwell, Boy Scouts of Troop No.117, Tom Fhy, Albert Cereghino, and Mason A. Bailey.

Secretary Jessie Potter wishes to thank all the members who have been so prompt in paying their dues. It really helps as your dues, plus the sale of extra Historians, is our only source of income.

* * * *

The following are new members since our printing of the latest membership list:

Dan Mariani	Madera
William Melvin	Coarsegold
Mrs. Stanley Jessing	Madera
Mr. and Mrs. Albert Rose	Fresno
Karl Losstrom	Lund, Sweden
Mr. and Mrs. Albert Miller	Madera
Mrs. Priscilla Perkins	Madera
Mrs. H. S. Armstrong	Madera
Mrs. David Edwards	Madera
Mrs. William Young	Madera
Mrs. James Gleason	Madera

The Board of Directors at its April meeting granted Honorary Membership to two of our members:

J. B. Williams	Age 99
Mrs. Amanda Dustheimer	Age 94

In our January issue we asked for information on the "Walnut Dairy" in Madera. We received several replies but the one Douglas Houston gave William Wilcox is as follows:

"The Dairy was owned by H. E. Baker. It was located in the vicinity of east of Madera Avenue and south of Avenue 12."

* * * *

Be sure to make this correction in your January Historian: On page 3, column 2, paragraph 1, it should read: "the five Newton girls".

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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN is published quarterly in January, April, July, and October by the Madera County Historical Society, P. O. Box 478, Madera, California, 93637. Subscription 50¢ per copy, $2.00 per year, is included in membership in the Society. Please credit "The Madera County Historian" when reproducing any part.